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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 008242

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SUBJECT: JORDAN-SYRIA RELATIONS BECOME PUBLICLY TESTY

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SUMMARY

11. (C) Senior GOJ officials have expressed to us recently growing frustration with increased smuggling, depletion of water resources, and Syrian military "violations" along and across the Jordan-Syria border. They have complained about Syrian unwillingness to restart discussions on a formal demarcation of the border, despite a formal request from former PM Abul Ragheb. Jordan and Syria have also clashed on trade issues, with the Syrian Ambassador in Amman delaying required no-Israeli-content import certifications and the Jordanian Trade Ministry temporarily stopping Syrian exports to Jordan in retaliation. CNN remarks by King Abdullah on the insecure border touched off a brief war of words in the press, quickly ended by a publicized phone call between the two Prime Ministers preventing further "estrangement." The Jordanians, not surprisingly, place the blame on the SARG and Syrian actions for the increased tension. Absent Syrian accommodations on trade and the border, we expect this tension to continue on and off in the new year, and GOJ officials are likely to continue to express their frustration with the Syrians. The current testiness falls into a familiar pattern, as wider regional changes (i.e. Iraq) have historically been cause for readjustments in the always uneasy Syrian-Jordanian relationship. END SUMMARY.

INCREASED ACTIVITY ALONG JORDAN-SYRIA BORDER

12. (C) Over the past several weeks, senior Jordanian officials have mentioned to USG visitors their impatience and growing irritation with the level of activity along the Jordan-Syria border, including smuggling of weapons and explosives and Syrian military "violations" of the border. King Abdullah raised with A/S Burns November 30 his concerns with Syrian movement into Jordanian territory after tactical repositioning of Jordanian border forces (ref a). Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, MG Saud Nsirat, told visiting Air Force Secretary Roche December 9 that there is "routine" shooting across the border and numerous incidents of Syrian troops firing small arms at passing Jordanian military aircraft. Nsirat expressed irritation at a recent editorial by a writer in the Syrian press (presumably ref b) that attacked the Hashemites as tools of American and Israeli policy in Iraq and the region. Numerous senior GOJ officials, both military and civilian, have complained to us that the volume and lethality of contraband smuggled across the Syrian border into Jordan -- they all assume with the acknowledge or assistance of the SARG -- have increased in the past year.

13. (C) Former PM Ali Abul Ragheb complained to the Ambassador earlier this year that Syrian forces had "occupied" Jordanian territory in several places (and noted that Jordanian forces also occupied a smaller amount of land that should belong to Syria). During a September 2003 visit to Damascus, then PM Abul Ragheb had discussed with (former) Syrian PM Mird the possibility of reviving the Jordan-Syria border commission and implementing a 1992 report recommending a final border demarcation. The subsequent change of PMs in both Amman and Damascus has prevented movement on this request. An official Petra news agency release on December 9 noted that new PM Faisal al-Fayez had spoken with new Syrian PM al-Itri that day about enhancing bilateral relations.

SYKES-PICOT THE BEST REFERENCE?

14. (C) MFA Legal Department head Samer Naber confirmed for Polcouns December 10 that Jordan has legally demarcated borders with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, but not with Syria. When working with legal issues surrounding the Syrian border, Naber noted, he refers to "an old State Department

report" and British-French demarcation agreements "that came out of the Sykes-Picot Agreement." He said Syria has over the past few years ignored requests by Jordan to revive the joint border commission and come to closure on a border once and for all. He also mentioned that Syria has permitted Syrian farmers to drill large numbers of wells along the border line, depleting the groundwater resources on the Jordanian side as well (he claimed that the Jordanian army strictly limits the number of wells drilled near the border on the Jordanian side). Jordanian military intelligence, he said, had submitted a report on Syrian water use along the border earlier this year to PM Abul Ragheb. The report had led the MFA to send a formal note to the Syrian Embassy on water use. Even though several months have passed, Naber sighed, the Syrians have not yet responded.

TRADE ISSUES ALSO RANKLE

15. (C) Egyptian DCM Mohammed Khairat (protect) told PolCouns that Jordan-Syrian tensions extend beyond border issues to trade as well. He said that senior Jordanian officials had complained to him last week that the Syrians had recently been more strict in imposing "trade controls" on Jordanian goods to ensure that "Israeli" goods did not go through Jordan to Syria. Worse, the Egyptian reported, Jordan has heard reports that the SARG has "lobbied" Gulf States to impose similar restrictions on Jordanian exports.

16. (C) The Secretary General of the Jordanian Ministry of Industry and Trade confirmed for EconCouns December 14 some increased trade tensions, which he blamed on the Syrian Ambassador in Amman. The Syrian, he claimed, "becomes protectionist" and delays signature of the SARG-required certification that Jordanian products exported to Syria are free of Israeli content whenever a Jordanian company is successful in exporting to Syria. The recent case of a delay in exports of aluminum foil prompted Jordan to retaliate, holding up 120 truckloads of Syrian exports to Jordan at the border for several days until the foil certification was issued. All this occurred, the SYG noted wryly, despite the signature two years ago of a Jordan-Syria "free trade" agreement -- "This is the way the Syrians are."

ANY DAM PROGRESS?

17. (C) On the positive side, Jordan Valley Authority Secretary General Zafer Alem told visiting NEA Senior Science

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Advisor, EconCouns, and Regional Environment Officer recently that construction of the Al-Wihdeh Dam along the Jordan/Syria border was moving full speed ahead. In a visit to the construction site in November, Alem and EmbOffs walked down to the Yarmouk River bed and along the border, meters from non-responsive Syrian security posts. Walking into Syrian territory as they surveyed the weir that had been built to divert Yarmouk River waters during the dam's construction, EmbOffs saw bulldozers and heavy equipment building the dam's buttress on the Syrian side of the border. Work crews cross back and forth on a daily basis with no difficulty, Alem said, and no scuffles or administrative problems threaten to postpone the Al-Wihdeh dam construction schedule. The only thing Alem lamented was having scaled down the dam capacity significantly from its original design -- conceived decades ago -- because Syria has been taking more than its share of Yarmouk water.

... AND THE TWO PM'S RESOLVE IT ALL ON THE PHONE

18. (SBU) Several articles in the local media in the last two weeks (see refs e and f for examples) have referred to the tensions in relations, blaming either the King's interview to CNN during his trip to Washington (in which he expressed concern over the security of the Syria-Iraq border) or Syrian press responses (ref b) as the proximate cause of the crisis. The Jordanian press expressed particular irritation at Syrian press "attacks" on King Abdullah as an agent of the U.S. However, according to several stories, the December 9 call from PM Fayed to PM Itri was "enough to end the escalation."

COMMENT

19. (C) As the King made clear in Washington, there is real irritation at the top levels of the GOJ with Syrian policy on the border. The growing list of irritants indicates together another oscillation in Syrian-Jordanian relations, which throughout their histories have been subject to sharp fluctuations, depending on inter-Arab geopolitics and domestic pressures. The latest tensions may simply reflect

an accumulation of small problems, but it comes against the backdrop of the King's disappointment with the Syrian president, a perception of Syrian weakness and defensiveness, and the eclipse of Iraqi power. Historically, such wider regional changes have provided occasion for readjustments in the balance of the Syrian-Jordanian relationship as one or the other side sees opportunities to redress old grievances or get the upper hand. However, at this stage, neither side appears willing to transform testiness into a real confrontation.

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